

Elder, Pastor, Evangelist, Bishop, Overseer, and Deacon —Positions in the Church—

By Stephen M. Golden
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There seems to be a lot of confusion regarding roles and offices in the Church. In order to make this a little more understandable, I have come up with the following compilation of information from the Scriptures and from two recognized lexicons of Biblical words.

Let's start with "elder."

The word for elder in the New Testament is presbuteros. Of elder, **Strong**¹ says:

NT: #4245

presbuteros (pres-boo'-ter-os); comparative of presbus (elderly); older; as noun, a senior; specifically, an Israelite Sanhedrist (also figuratively, member of the celestial council) or Christian "presbyter":

KJV - elder (-est), old.

New Testament references for elder are:

- 1 Timothy 5:1 Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; (KJV)
- 1 Timothy 5:19 Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. (KJV)
- 1 Peter 5:1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: (KJV)
- 1 Peter 5:5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. (KJV)
- 3 John 1:1 The elder unto the well beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. (KJV)

Note how these verses apply to a man, or men, of age. The term "elder" is not an "office" in the Church. For example:

Acts 20:17-18

17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. 18 When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia

Does this mean an office? Or does it mean those having wisdom acquired through age? If we are to have a consistent understanding of Scripture, it means those venerated men of wisdom gained through age and experience. More on that in a bit.

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Next, let's consider "Pastor"

The word pastor [poiménas] connotes shepherd and is used in only in Ephesians 4:11 as a designation of purpose for some believers.

Ephesians 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; (KJV)

Pastor is *not* established in Scripture as the "Christian" word for the "singular leader of a congregation," even though most Christian denominations have designated it as such.

Strong² says of pastor in Ephesians 4:11

4166 **poimen** (poy-mane'); of uncertain affinity; a shepherd (literally or figuratively): KJV-- shepherd, pastor.

(Strong's Greek/Hebrew Dictionary)

Vine³ says of pastor in Ephesians 4:11

PASTOR

poimen ^4166^, "a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks" (not merely one who feeds them), is used metaphorically of Christian "pastors," <Ephesians 4:11>. "Pastors" guide as well as feed the flock, cf. <Acts 20:28>, which with <v. 17>, indicates that this was the service committed to elders (overseers or bishops); so also in <1 Pet. 5:1,2>, "tend the flock... exercising the oversight," RV; this involves tender care and vigilant superintendence. See SHEPHERD.

The function of the pastor is one who serves as a "shepherd of the flock."

Now, Dale Schlafer, one of the writers for "*Seven Promises... (Promise Keepers)*" refers to Paul as "...an apostle and pastor...." Paul was an apostle, but he was *not* a pastor. That was not his role. He was an Apostle and an Evangelist, but not a Pastor.

There are different roles in the Church of our Lord. Some of them are gifts, some are appointments. Those which are gifts are mentioned in Ephesians 4:11.

Ephesians 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; (KJV)

There are distinct differences between each of the functions mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, and these are different from appointed positions. The role of pastor is a gift from God. While it is possible for a person to have more than one

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³ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words Copyright © 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers

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role, it is not necessarily so. Paul was an Apostle. He was also an Evangelist. There is no indication he served as a “pastor,” and he was certainly never appointed as Overseer or Deacon, although he definitely became an “elder.”

The Evangelist

The Evangelist was one who was instructed in truth and doctrine by a reliable man of God and then traveled from place to place proclaiming the Gospel and helping churches along the way with things that were wanting regarding doctrine and structure. Originally, many of the Apostles were also Evangelists. The reliable sources in the day were the Apostles and then the Evangelists they commissioned. Today, the reliable men would include Christian colleges and seminaries as well as leaders of local congregations that have well-developed educational programs. In many English-speaking countries, especially in the United States, the Evangelist became additionally known as “the preacher” or “the minister.” In rural areas, one Evangelist would serve multiple small congregations by traveling in a circuit.

For indications of the role of Evangelist in the New Testament, we can look at two men whom Paul commissioned to do this work: Timothy and Titus. Paul writes to each of them regarding their role as Evangelist.

2 Timothy 4:5

[5] But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Paul had just described the work of Evangelist in the preceding verses:

[4:1] I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom:
[2] **preach the word; be ready** in season *and* out of season; **reprove, rebuke, exhort**, with great patience and instruction. [3] For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, [4] and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. [NASB]

“Setting in order things that are wanting”

Titus 1:5

[5] For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: [KJV]

[5] The reason I left you in Crete was to set in order the remaining matters and to appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. [NET]

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Another man whom the New Testament describes as an evangelist (in Acts 21:8) was one called Philip. He was not “Philip, the Apostle.” Instead, he was one of the seven men appointed as a deacon by the Church in Jerusalem. These were not a small group of four or five men, and then there were no more. Evangelists served the purpose of helping all the churches “speak the same thing” and being one in faith and practice.

So, the Evangelist travels to various cities and sets in order things that need to be established or corrected for the proper functioning of the Church in each city. This includes appointing Overseers and Deacons, training them in the ways of leading the Church, and instructing them how to carry on the ministry. When the task is completed in each city, the Evangelist travels on to another city, as he is led by the Lord, to help the Christians there establish and maintain a well-functioning body of Christ.

Paul continually traveled to places as he received the call

Acts 16

[9] A vision appeared to Paul during the night: A Macedonian man was standing there urging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” [10] After Paul saw the vision, we attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. [NIV]

An exploration of Paul’s ministry shows he moved from place to place helping the Christians in each congregation along the way.

Sometimes he would stay extended lengths of time. Such was the case in Macedonia where he stayed a year and a half. (Acts 18:11)

The authority and recommendations of the Evangelist today must be completely grounded in Scripture. He has no other authority. Although he may give advice of wisdom gained from experience, his instruction and correction must not come from his personal opinion or preference. (1 Corinthians 11:16)

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So what is a Bishop or Overseer [*Episcopos*]?

The New Testament verses that list Bishop or Overseer are:

Philippians 1:1

[1] Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the **bishops** and deacons:

1 Timothy 3:1-2

[1] This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a **bishop**, he desireth a good work. [2] A **bishop** then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; (KJV)

Titus 1:5-7

[5] For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: [6] If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. [7] For a **bishop** must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; (KJV)

According to **Strong**⁴, bishop, as used in these two passages, is defined as follows:

1 Timothy 3:1 #1984 **episkope** (ep-is-kop-ay'); from #1980; inspection (for relief); by implication, superintendence; specially, the Christian "episcopate":

KJV-- the office of a "bishop", bishoprick, visitation.

Titus 5:7 #1985 **episkopos** (ep-is'-kop-os); from #1909 and #4649 (in the sense of #1983); a superintendent, i.e. Christian officer in genitive case charge of a (or the) church (literally or figuratively):

KJV-- bishop, overseer.

The office of Overseer is an appointed position of leadership, not a gift from God. "Pastor" may be one *function* of the role of Overseer (or Bishop).

As you can see in the Titus passage, there is not to be *one* leader of the local congregation but several bishops or overseers. Paul tells Titus to ordain elders (older men, plural) as overseers in every city. In those days, there was usually only one congregation in each city. Multiple overseers are necessary to ensure that Satan does not enter one man and lead the entire congregation astray. Also, congregations didn't "vote" on this position. Overseers were appointed by an Evangelist. Our culture tends to want to vote on everything. However, in the

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absence of an Evangelist, I see no reason the appointed Overseers might not appoint additional Overseers as necessary.

These “*Episcopoi*” are the leaders of the local congregation. Some groups call their leaders “elders” but a man can be an elder and not be a bishop. The men that Paul instructed to be ordained were already “elders” — a station the men had achieved by the wisdom gained through their years of experience. An elder is a respected station that every man of God will achieve. Bishop (*episkopos*) or Overseer, on the other hand, is the office of leadership in the Church.

And finally, Deacons

The word "deacon," in the general context, simply means "servant" and can include women. However, it has a specific meaning in the Church, due to the fact that it was an appointed position of leadership, and these are ascribed to men. One can't really be a leader if one is instructed to be silent in the churches, as were women. Also, it wasn't simply anyone who served, since it was a role that had qualification requirements.

1 Timothy 3:8–13

[8] Deacons, likewise, are to be **men** worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. [9] They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. [10] They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. [11] In the same way, **their wives** are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the **husband** of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. [13] Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:1

[1] Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

The Philippians passage mentions the two offices in the Church. It indicates Deacon was a standard role in the Church; not just a general term for one who serves.